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## Innovative business English methodology in Iran

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### Abstract

The Iranian Business English learner community entails employees whose English proficiency is unsatisfactory. However, one of the major requirements for promotion is qualification in General Business English Skills. Therefore, Iranian Business English instructors are expected to seek, develop and/or employ instructional methodologies which on the one hand, are appealing, practical, time saving, cost effective, and learner friendly, engaging participants in the learning process. Thus, upon the request of an automotive part supplier (SAPco), the present 5-year Business English project has been developed and piloted through the application of technology and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) to train 1500 staff in general Business English skills. The project has been certified as an innovative teaching methodology in the automotive industry in Iran.

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*Keywords:* Business English; CALL; Technology; Instruction; Methodology

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### 1. Introduction

The history of pedagogical application of computers for language instruction purposes goes back to 1960s (Davies, 1997). The history of CALL (Computer-assisted Language Learning) can be classified into three main phases, namely structural CALL (1960s-1980), Communicative CALL (1980s-1990s) and Integrative Call (1990s to Present). Since 1900, researchers called on learners as constructors who are engaged in meaning construction, analysis, investigation, collaboration, sharing and building based on what they already know, rather than what facts, skills, and processes they can parrot. In other words, problem solving and critical thinking were the main engagements of the constructor learners. This trend resulted in further emphasis on the significance of learning language in authentic social contexts and

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many instructors gradually moved away from cognitive approach of communicative teaching. Consequently, the instructors tended to turn to task-based, project-based, and content-based approaches, all of which sought to integrate learners in authentic environments, and also, to integrate various skills of language learning and use. This tendency gave birth to a new perspective on technology and language learning and teaching, which has been termed as *integrative CALL*, an approach which seeks to integrate various skills, for example, listening, speaking, reading and writing with the purpose of applying technology more fully to the language learning and teaching process.

Although some decades ago, language instruction techniques largely entailed conventional face to face methodologies which rather conservatively led both instructors and learners through the teaching-learning path (e.g. Richards&Rodgers, 2001), these days with immense evolutionary technological developments in the world and the ongoing demand of both language instructors and learners for facilitative pedagogical techniques and methods, innovative application or replication of the popularly practiced methods is at demand. This can well be practiced through combining features and functions of well-known learning and teaching techniques (Harriman, 2004; Williams, 2003). The present study reports the deployment of an innovative teaching methodology called BTGBEI (Blended Task-based General Business English Instruction). BTGBEI has been developed and practiced upon the request of the training department of SAPCO (Supplying automotive parts company) in Tehran, Iran since 2006.

## 2. The present study

### 2.1. Course description

The present paper reports the application of BTGBEI (Blended Task-based General Business English Instruction) as an innovative teaching methodology which has been practiced for almost 5 years in Iran. The courses developed based on BTGBEI were mainly divided into three main categories (Tables 2, 3, 4).

The first series of the courses were called “Effective business Skills” and the selected course books were published by *Oxford University Press*. The classes were held by solo instructors.

Table1.First Series of Courses: Effective Business Skills

Courses	Hours	Number of courses held
Effective Socializing	40-42	18
Effective Telephoning	30-60	20
Effective Meetings	42-50	16
Effective Presentations	30	5
Effective Business Correspondences	20-22	14

The second series of the courses were called “English for professionals” and the course books were in the form of task-based pamphlets developed by the instructors themselves.

Table2.Second series of Courses: English for Professionals (Collegial Instruction)

Courses	Hours	Number of courses held
Socializing	44	3
Telephoning	44	3
Meetings	44	3
Presentations	44	3
Business Correspondences	44	3

The third series of the courses were called “Business Results” and the course books were published by *oxford university press*. The classes were run by solo instructors.

Table 3. Third series Effective business English courses

Courses	Hours	Number of courses held	Levels
Business Results (Elementary)	35-43	9	E1-E3
Business Results(Pre-intermediate)	35-42	12	PI1-PI4
Business Results(Intermediate)	42	3	I1-I3

All the classes were held in SAPCO's training department. According to BTGBEI the classes were mixed in some sessions to facilitate more practice and exposure to new contacts. In addition, the assessment sessions were also held by mixing partners from other classes. Number of students in each class has been 18 except for the second series of the courses whose students were 30. The instructors were graduates of TEFL M.A. and Ph.D.

## 2.2. Theory of language

BTGBEI initially takes structural, functional, interactive, cooperative and social components of language into consideration. Furthermore, in BTGBEI, language has been approached as goal-oriented and purposeful with main focus on meaning making and meaning transfer. In conclusion, the theory of language employed in the present methodology is in line with Communicative language teaching, cooperative language teaching, content-based language instruction, and task-based language learning.

## 2.3. Theory of learning

BTGBEI has been formed on the basis of blended learning. The term *blended learning* has been perceived variously. This is not a new phenomenon in ELT, where many terms have several interpretations. Sharma & Barrett (2007) in their book called *Blended Learning* have presented a list of typical interpretations listed below:

- A combination of online and in-person classroom learning activities
- Learning or training events or activities where e-learning, in its various forms, is combined with more traditional forms of training such as 'classroom training'.
- The combination of multiple approaches to teaching or to educational processes which involve deployment of diversity of methods and resources.
- Combining...(different) web-based technologies
- A mixture of face-to face ....and distance learning(Frendo, 2005)
- Combining e-learning with ...Face to Face (Smith and Baber, 2005)

To be more specific, BTGBEI is primarily the combination of task-based language instruction and application of technology. The term technology covers a wide range of recent technologies such as internet, CD-ROMs and Interactive Whiteboards. It further entails the use of computers as a means of communication, such as chat and email, and a number of environments which enables instructors to enrich their course, such as VLEs (virtual learning environments), blogs and wikis.

BTGBEI has adopted a task-based approach toward learning. Thus, the selected, designed, developed and employed tasks were meaningful and authentic. This theory of learning further considered cognitive and individual variables along with linguistic and social ones.

In BTGBEI method, learning takes place through the application of various tasks which often include physical activities or sometimes called on the learner's past experience through collaboration and partnership. In fact, learning occurs through encouraging a variety of communication styles in tasks and

channelling learners through particular aspects of language. This would consequently lead to developing both fluency and awareness of language form and will finally lead to General Business Skill development.

#### *2.4. Types of learning and teaching activities*

Activities developed in BTGBEI method entail conversation and discussion sessions, dialogue and role plays, simulations, improvisations and debates in connection with General Business English Skills namely, socializing, meetings, negotiations and telephoning. Since BTGBEI is a task-based instructional method, it employs the following task types:

- Information-gap tasks: one student of a group of students has one set of information and another student or group has a complementary set of information. They must negotiate and find out what the other party's information is in order to complete an activity.
- Problem solving tasks: students are given a problem and a set of information. They must arrive at a solution to the problem. There is generally a single resolution of the outcome.
- Decision-making tasks: students are given a problem for which there are a number of possible outcomes and they must choose one through negotiation and discussion.
- Opinion exchange tasks: learners engage in discussion and exchange of ideas. They do not need to reach agreement.

#### *2.5. Learner roles*

In BTGBEI method, the learners actively participate in pair (in business socializing) and group work (in business socializing and meetings) tasks and are involved in tasks as negotiators (in business meetings and negotiations), problem solvers (in business socializing and meetings), and observers, foreign delegates (in business socializing, meetings and negotiations). In all these mentioned cases, the learners are expected to perform innovatively and at times spontaneously.

#### *2.6. Instructor roles*

In BTGBEI method, the instructor plays an active role before the course starts (as a program planner, syllabus designer and materials developer), before every session (planner and decision maker), during every session (instructor, facilitator, counsellor, partner, role model, problem solver, decision maker) after every session (communicator, coordinator, assignment organizer, assessor) and at the end of every course (rater, examiner or assessor).

#### *2.7. The role of instructional materials*

In BTGBEI method the materials are categorized into two main classifications; firstly the tasks included in Business English course books available in market namely, Effective Business Skills and Business Results published by Oxford University Press and secondly prepared instructor-made business English pamphlets which included real life and authentic tasks in line with the target learners' (SAPCO employees) needs and current working situations.

Both types of materials were accompanied by interactive workbook CD ROMs, audio listening tracks, DVD videos, Longman Contemporary Dictionary installed in the classroom computer and shown on the screen board. In addition to the aforementioned material, the learners and instructors have constant access to internet in the class and the opportunity to be connected to websites and weblogs for further practice.

### 3. Conclusion

The present study reports the deployment of an innovative teaching methodology called BTGBEI (Blended Task-based General Business English Instruction). BTGBEI has been developed and practiced upon the request of the training department of SAPCO (Supplying automotive parts company) in Tehran, Iran since 2006. BTGBEI was developed through the integration of TBL (Task based language learning) and CALL (computer assisted language learning). The innovative aspects of BTGBEI method lie in the following statements:

- Application of TBL as one of the most successful post-modern teaching methodologies in ELT.
- Application of Integrated CALL through the adoption of internet and other mediums of technology as facilitator means of learning and teaching.
- The blended pedagogy introduced in this paper is a pioneer one in Business English courses in a foreign language context like Iran.
- The assessment techniques employed as complementary to this method of instruction has been creative oral task-based assessments which were both time saving and cost effective.
- BTGBEI experienced collegial instruction model.
- Through the application of BTGBEI in collegial instruction model the instructors could positively be involved in a pedagogical knowledge development process.

In conclusion, the development of BTGBEI has been as an achievement for SAPCO since it was the first domestic company to support the team of researchers in this innovative study. BTGBEI's success is due to the learners' satisfaction and the intra- organizational assessments carried out during these 6 years.

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